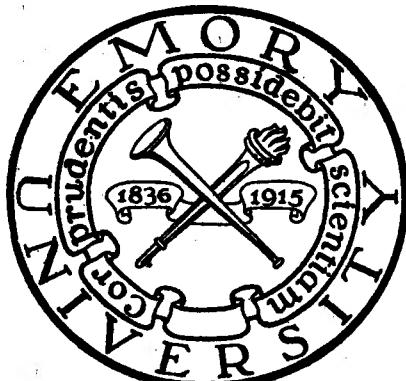


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PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF THE
BATTLES OF THE REBELLION,
BEING
PAPERS READ BEFORE THE
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

No. 1.

*"Quaeque ipse miserrima vidi,
Et quorum pars magna fui."*

PROVIDENCE:
SIDNEY S. RIDER.
1878.

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1878.

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THE FIRST CAMPAIGN

OF THE

SECOND RHODE ISLAND INFANTRY.

BY

ELISHA H. RHODES,

(Late Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding Second Rhode Island Infantry
Brevet Colonel United States Volunteers.)

PROVIDENCE:
SIDNEY S. RIDER.
1878.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

A few years since, it occurred to some of the comrades residing in this city, who served in the United States Army and Navy during the war of the rebellion, to form themselves into an association under the name of the "Rhode Island Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society," for the purpose of collecting, as far as they were able, documents concerning the civil war, and of putting on record some of the unwritten history of that contest, in the hope that their labors might, perhaps, be of value to the future historian. As a part of the means to this end, these comrades have, from time to time, written and read before the Society papers treating of their own experiences and recollections of notable events as they saw them. In the belief that these papers will be pleasant reading for all who were interested in the great conflict, and contain many facts of historical value, as well as tend to keep alive memories of patriotism, bravery and self-sacrifice. It is proposed to publish them in a series of pamphlets uniform in size and style for preservation. The initial number, *The Campaign of the Second Rhode Island Infantry* by Colonel Rhodes, is here presented. It was read before the Society, November 3rd, 1875, and was the first one of the series. Others are in preparation and will speedily follow.

PROVIDENCE, July, 1878.

THE FIRST CAMPAIGN
OF THE
SECOND RHODE ISLAND INFANTRY.

UPON the call of the President of the United States, in the Spring of 1861, for troops to serve for the period of three years, measures were taken to organize a regiment to be known as the Second Rhode Island Volunteers. It was my fortune to be one of the first to volunteer for service as a soldier in this command, and I propose to relate in plain and simple language, my experience during the first few weeks of the war, including a description of the First Battle of Bull Run, as seen from the standpoint of an enlisted man. I am aware that I have selected a difficult subject, as perhaps no campaign of the War of the Rebellion has given rise to more contradictory statements and reports than the one I shall

attempt to describe this evening. In the excited state of the people at this time, and in the absence of a proper appreciation of military affairs, skirmishes were magnified into battles, and the highest importance was attached to events that in after years were considered of very little if of any consequence. If in the course of my paper I am obliged to frequently refer to myself, I know you will excuse me when you remember that this paper is a personal narrative, a record of what I saw and felt, and not a history of general events.

I enlisted at the armory of the First Light Infantry Company, in Providence, R. I., and assisted in organizing a company composed of about one hundred and forty men, which command, after being properly officered, was tendered to Colonel John S. Slocum as part of the regiment to be raised. The number of recruits offered from all parts of the State was largely in excess of the number required, and rendered it necessary that some organizations should be declined, and as the Infantry had already sent two companies into the First Rhode Island Detached Militia, our company was ordered to disband, much to our

disappointment. Twenty-five men, however, were selected from our ranks and assigned to a company commanded by Captain William H. P. Steere. My name was included in the number selected, and I suddenly found myself changed from an "Infantry" man to a "National Cadet." This company was mustered into the United States service as Company "D," June 5th, 1861, in a building on Eddy street, Providence, and ranked fourth in the regimental formation. Uniforms were issued, consisting of the so-called "Rhode Island blouse," grey pants, and hats looped up at the side.

On the seventh of June the first parade was made and the regiment proceeded to Exchange Place and there listened to an official announcement of the death of the Honorable Stephen A. Douglas. On the eighth the regiment went into camp on Dexter Training Ground, which was named in honor of the Colonel of the First Rhode Island Detached Militia, "Camp Burnside." Sibley tents were issued and our camp life began. Our company being unable to procure tents passed the first night in a carpenter shop on the corner of Cranston and Gilmore Streets. One member

of the regiment was drummed out of camp to the tune of the rogue's march, creating quite a sensation not only in the camp but among the citizens of the city. I remember that we made several parades, and on one occasion attended Divine service at Grace Church and were addressed by Rt. Rev. Bishop Clark. The colors which the regiment carried into the field were presented by the ladies of Providence, June twelfth, by the hands of Hon. Jabez C. Knight, Mayor, and the scene was one long remembered by the men.

A battery of light artillery, armed with James twelve pounder guns, had been organized, and under command of Captain William H. Reynolds was attached to the regiment. This battery was known afterwards as "Battery A, First Rhode Island Light Artillery," and at the close of the Bull Run campaign was detached from the regiment.

Rumors of our intended departure for the seat of war had become numerous, but for reasons best known to the authorities our breaking camp was delayed until June nineteenth, when tents were struck, baggage and knapsacks packed, and the regiment

moved out of camp, and marching by way of High, Westminster and South Main Streets, took the steamer State of Maine near Fox Point. The Battery embarked upon the steamer Kill-von-kull. The streets were crowded with people, and we left the wharf amid the tearful farewells and cheers of our friends. Rations of bread and salt beef were served on board the transport, and we had our first taste of army fare, having lived sumptuously while encamped in Providence. The novelty of the trip banished sleep from our eyes, and we passed the night indulging in such mild demonstrations as military discipline would permit. By early morning we were in New York, and after touching at the wharf for orders, we steamed away to Elizabeth, New Jersey, where we landed and took the cars for Baltimore *via* York and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. All day we slowly rolled along the track and on the afternoon of the twenty-first found ourselves in the vicinity of Baltimore.

Rumors had been heard along the route that an attack was to be made upon us while marching through Baltimore, and the excitement in the regi-

ment ran high. Three ball cartridges were issued to each man in the cars, and as we had the old style of flint-lock gun, altered to percussion, we found each cartridge to contain three buck shot in addition to the ball. Most of the men carried revolvers, although strict orders had been issued against the practice. In the search which was made by the officers for concealed weapons, I managed (as most of the boys did) to save mine from capture. It was dark when we disembarked at Baltimore and we found the streets crowded with people. Strict orders had been given us to answer no questions and hold no conversation with any one. Silently we slung our knapsacks, and taking our places in line began the march. Cheers for Jeff. Davis were given by the crowd on the sidewalks, and some abuse was heaped upon us, but we kept on our march, ready to repel an attack. My knapsack contained a load sufficient for a dozen men, and with aching back I tramped on, not daring to stop for fear of the crowd. As I look back upon this short march, I remember it as one of the most fatiguing ones I ever experienced. But I learned a useful lesson: never to put more in a knapsack than I could comfortably carry.

After taking the cars for Washington we heard many rumors of intentions to run us off the track, which kept the men on the alert, and fears of an attack caused sleep to be out of the question. It seems strange now to think of our alarm, but at the time it was dangers unseen, more than seen, that troubled us.

On the morning of June twenty-second the regiment arrived in Washington, and we had our first view of the Capitol. Forming column, we marched out New York Avenue, a distance of about three miles, to Gale's Woods, where we found a camp adjoining the barracks occupied by the First Rhode Island Detached Militia. Our camp was called "Camp Clark," in honor of Bishop Clark, who accompanied us to Washington. The boys of the First Rhode Island greeted us with hearty cheers, and we were soon made at home in their comfortable quarters.

The next few weeks were passed in perfecting our discipline and knowledge of a soldier's duty. Our camp was a centre of attraction for the Washington people, and the evening parades of both regiments were witnessed by thousands. The parades were

held in the camp of the First Regiment, the Colonels alternating in command. Rumors of intended movements were continually reaching camp, and every skirmish in Virginia was magnified into a battle. While stationed at "Camp Clark" we experienced little, if any, of the unpleasant and disagreeable part of a soldier's life. Rations were issued in bulk to both regiments, and cooked under the supervision of the commissary of the First Rhode Island. The daily fare consisted of roast beef and plum pudding for dinner, while the morning and evening meals were more like what one would expect to find at home, rather than in the army. I remember well our disgust at receiving, just before we started on the Bull Run march, an issue of army rations composed of hard tack and salt pork.

On the eighteenth day of July we broke camp and moved out into New York avenue, where we found the brigade to which we were assigned, which up to this time we had known only in name. The brigade consisted of the First and Second Rhode Island Volunteers, the Second New Hampshire Volunteers and the Seventy-first New York Militia, the whole un-

der command of the senior Colonel, Ambrose E. Burnside. Excitement ran high in the streets, and as we moved through the city we were loudly cheered by the people. Crossing the Potomac, by Long Bridge, we took the road to Fairfax Court House. It being late when we crossed the river, only a short march was made, and we halted for the night at Annandale. This was our first experience in sleeping without tents and by camp fires. Rails were soon collected and immense fires started, we imagining this to be the correct thing for soldiers to do, although on a hot July night.

Early the next morning, the nineteenth, we resumed the march. Co. "D," Captain Steere, was detailed as flankers, and we started off with little, if any, idea of our duty or danger. I remember we found an old railroad embankment covered with blackberry bushes, and the entire company stopped and ate their fill. This march partook more of the character of a pleasant ramble than that of an armed force looking for an enemy. About noon, in company with two other men, I found myself on the summit of a hill, and looking back to our left and rear I saw the

spires of a town that we had passed unnoticed. I reported the fact to Captain Steere, and with his glass we decided that it must be Fairfax. Captain Steere formed his company into a square, and in this manner we entered the town by a side street and below the Court House. The rebels, in their haste, had left many articles lying in the streets, and if we had not been restrained by the good sense of our Captain, we should have loaded ourselves with the useless trumpery.

Halting in the main street we were soon joined by the head of our regiment, that came in by the main road. The rebel flag was taken down and the Stars and Stripes raised by one of our men. It fell to our lot to be placed in camp in the grounds of a mansion which had been occupied by the rebel commanding general. In looking about the house I found among some loose papers a subsistence return, showing the number of men to whom rations had been issued the day before. I gave the paper to Captain Nelson Viall and he sent it to army headquarters. The passion for pillage broke out, but was quickly suppressed, though many ludicrous

scenes occurred. I remember one man entering camp with a Bible under one arm and an immense engraving of the Father of his Country under the other. An officer obliged him to restore the articles to the house. A piano, from which the strings had been taken, served as a cupboard for some of the boys. The inhabitants had fled and we had the town all to ourselves.

On the twentieth we left Fairfax Court House and encamped a few miles beyond, near Centreville. Here we built shelters with pine and cedar boughs, and this camp is known to this day as "Bush Camp" by the men of the Second Rhode Island Volunteers. Here we heard our first hostile shot, and although at a distance, yet it served to impress us with what was likely to follow.

About two o'clock, on the morning of July twenty-first, we left "Bush Camp," and marching down the hill, through Centreville, found the roads obstructed by wagons and troops that had failed to start on time. Soon the Second left the main road and struck off to the right, through a wood path that had been much obstructed. As we led the brigade the task of

clearing the road fell to us, and hard work we found it. About nine o'clock in the forenoon we reached Sudley church, and a distant gun startled us, but we did not realize that our first battle was so near at hand. We now took a side road that skirted a piece of woods and marched for some distance, the men amusing themselves with laughter and jokes, with occasional stops for berries. On reaching a clearing, separated from our left flank by a rail fence, we were saluted with a volley of musketry, which, however, was fired so high that all the bullets went over our heads. I remember that my first sensation was one of astonishment at the peculiar whir of the bullets, and that the regiment immediately laid down without waiting for orders. Colonel Slocum gave the command, "By the left flank — MARCH!" and we commenced crossing the field. One of our boys by the name of Webb fell off of the fence and broke his bayonet. This caused some amusement, for even at this time we did not realize that we were about to engage in battle.

As we crossed the fence, the rebels, after firing a few scattering shots, fled down a slope to the woods.

We followed to the brow of the hill and opened fire. Our battery came into position on our right and replied to the rebel artillery, which was sending their shell into our line. Of what followed, I have very confused ideas. I remember that my smooth bore gun became so foul that I was obliged to strike the ramrod against a fence to force the cartridge home, and soon exchanged it for another. There was a hay stack in front of our line, and some of the boys sheltered themselves behind it. A shell from the enemy striking the stack covered the men with hay, from which they emerged and retook their places in line. About this time, Private Thomas Parker of Co. "D" captured a prisoner, a member of the Louisiana Tiger regiment, and as he brought him back to the line was spoken to by Colonel Slocum.

Colonel Slocum had crossed a rail fence in our front and had advanced nearer to the brow of the hill than the line occupied by the regiment. As he returned and was in the act of climbing the fence, he fell on the side next to the regiment. I, being the nearest man to him at the time, raised him up,

but was unable to lift him from the ground. Calling for help, Private Parker (mentioned above) dropped his gun and came to my assistance. Together we bore him to a small house on the left of the line and laying him upon the floor, sent for Colonel Burnside, Surgeon Francis L. Wheaton and Chaplain Thorndike Jameson, who all arrived in a few moments, a lull in the fight having occurred. Chaplain Augustus Woodbury and Assistant Surgeon James Harris, of the First Rhode Island Detached Militia, were already in attendance. With the sponge, from my cap, I washed the blood from his head and found that the bullet had ploughed a furrow from rear to front through the top of his head, but had not lodged. His ankle (I cannot call to mind which one) was also injured, having two wounds upon it. While unable to speak, yet he appeared conscious, and at my request would remove his hand from his wounded head. When it was decided to place the Colonel in an ambulance, I took a door from its hinges with my gun screw driver, and assisted in carrying him on this door to the ambulance. Colonel Slocum, as is well known, fell into the hands of the enemy and died of his injuries.

But to go back to the battle, the Second Regiment was engaged about thirty minutes without support, when the balance of the brigade was brought on to the field and the battle became general. The Eighth Georgia regiment was in our immediate front, and received the benefit of our fire. We had a tradition in our regiment until the close of the war, that the Second Rhode Island nearly annihilated this Georgia regiment. Since the close of the war, I have seen a paper, written and printed in the South, which gives the Second Rhode Island the credit of having broken up and destroyed the Eighth Georgia so completely that it had to be reorganized. Shot and shell were continually striking in or near our line and the troops became much scattered. Losing my own company I joined Company F, under command of Lieutenant William B. Sears, and remained with them until the battle ceased and we withdrew to replenish our ammunition.

About three o'clock in the afternoon the enemy disappeared in our front and the firing ceased. We considered that a victory had been won. The wounded were cared for and then orders came for us

to retire to a piece of woods in our rear and fill our boxes with ammunition. We found the First Rhode Island in the woods with arms stacked and some of the men cooking. I remember of meeting friends in the First Regiment and congratulating them on our victory, little expecting the finale of our day's fighting.

The firing, which had gradually receded, now seemed to be nearer, and soon a shell fired into the woods told us that the enemy had returned to renew the combat. I cannot explain the causes for what followed. The woods and roads were soon filled with fleeing men and our brigade was ordered to the front to cover the retreat, which it was now evident could not be stopped. Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Wheaton who, on the fall of Colonel Slocum, had assumed command, posted the regiment to the left of our first position and behind a fence. The field was soon clear of troops, excepting our brigade, all of which except the Second Rhode Island, were posted farther back from the brow of the hill. The rebels came on in splendid order, pushing two light field guns to the front with them. We received their fire and held

them in check until the brigade had taken up their march, when we followed—the last to leave the field. The rebels followed us for a short distance, shelling our rear, and then we pursued our march unmolested, until we reached the vicinity of the bridge that crosses Cub Run. Here a rebel battery opened upon us from a corner of the woods and the stampede commenced. The bridge was soon rendered impassible by the teams that obstructed it, and we here lost five of the guns belonging to our battery. Many men were killed and wounded at this point, and a panic seemed to seize upon every one. In my opinion (looking at the matter from a more safe standpoint than I occupied that day) a few determined men might have captured the rebel guns and the crossing been effected in safety. As our regiment was now broken, I looked for a place to cross the stream, not daring to try the bridge. I jumped into the run and holding my gun above my head struggled across with the water up to my waist. After crossing, the regiment gradually formed again, and we continued our march to Centreville where we found Blenker's troops posted across the road to

protect the retreat. We passed through their ranks, and entered our old grounds, "Bush Camp," supposing the retreat to be at an end.

Tired, hungry and wet, we laid down, only to be awakened about eleven o'clock that night to resume the march towards Washington, in the midst of a rain storm. The regiment filed out of camp and marched to Fairfax Court House, in good order and rested in the streets. Crowds of soldiers were hurrying by and the streets were blocked with trains. After halting a few minutes we started again and soon, in the darkness, rain and crowd, became broken up to some extent. Of the horrors of that night, I can give you no adequate idea. I suffered untold horrors from thirst and fatigue, but struggled on, clinging to my gun and cartridge box. Many times I sat down in the mud determined to go no further, and willing to die to end my misery. But soon a friend would pass and urge me to make another effort, and I would stagger on a mile further. At daylight we could see the spires of Washington, and a welcome sight it was. About eight o'clock I reached Fort Runyon, near Long Bridge, and giving

my gun to an officer, who was collecting them, I entered a tent and was soon asleep. Towards noon I awoke and, with my company, endeavored to cross Long Bridge, but fell exhausted before reaching the Washington side. My officers kindly placed me in an army wagon and I was carried to camp, where, after rest and proper care, I soon recovered and went on duty.

The loss of the regiment in this disastrous affair was ninety-three killed, wounded and missing. Of this number, four officers were killed, namely, Colonel John S. Slocum, Major Sullivan Ballou, Captain Levi Tower and Captain S. James Smith. Twenty-six enlisted men were killed or mortally wounded. My Company, "D," lost four killed, three wounded, one of whom died, and one missing.

Duyckinck, in his History of the Rebellion, makes the following mention of the regiment and the part it took in this battle :

"The history of the Second Rhode Island Volunteers may be cited as an example of those to whom Bull Run was no disgrace. They were near the extreme right in the engagement. Their previous march had been as fatiguing as that of others; they

were as badly off for food as others, having nothing but a few crackers to eat for more than thirty-six hours. They were the first to engage, were severely engaged, as long as or longer than any others; they were badly cut up, losing their Colonel and other officers, and sixteen per cent. of their ranks killed. (This should be sixteen per cent. killed and wounded.) They stood firm under fire while the panic stricken crowd swept by and through them, and until they received the order to retreat. They then wheeled steadily into column and marched in good order, until the road was obstructed by overturned wagons. Here they were badly broken up by a cannonade, scattered and disorganized, but afterwards having mainly collected at Centreville, reformed and marched the same night, under such of their officers as remained alive, to and through Washington, to a position several miles to the northward—a post of danger—where they at once resumed regular camp duties. When visited, a few days afterwards, by an inspector, he was told and led to believe that the men only wanted a day's rest to be ready and willing to advance again upon the enemy. He reported the regiment not demoralized."

